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ABSTRACT

Missing apostrophes, misplaced apostrophes, and unnecessary apostrophes are all common occurrences in many forms of written American English. The fact is there is no adequate explanation--in traditional grammar or in any other grammar--that accounts for all the functions and transformations that grammarians have crowded under the heading of the genitive case. In fact, many writers who omit the possessive apostrophe, including freshmen writing students, do so quite logically, according to a set of "rules" not found in any grammar book. The most basic rule is as follows: when a noun phrase cannot be paraphrased as an unambiguous "possessive" using an "of" construction, writers tend to omit the apostrophe. One of the contingencies that complicates this rule is the issue of how "possession" is determined, as well as who/what is able to "possess." In other words, humans are considered more able than inanimate objects to "possess" a given object. In the end what is inarguable is that the phenomenon of the missing apostrophe in contemporary written English offers a unique opportunity to record and describe the kind of pervasive morphemic, grammatical and syntactical change that, for the most part, has only been observed in a post facto, static way. (TB)

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ED 370 125

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The (Un)ruly Apostrophe

In this paper (first presented at the American Dialect Society Meeting in 1993), the phenomenon of the missing, misplaced, or unnecessary apostrophe mark is discussed, and suggestions are made for predicting or anticipating various (mis)uses of the apostrophe. After examining the pattern behind these errors, a grammatical "rule" that appears to lie behind such errors is postulated.

The basic "rule" is as follows: When a noun phrase cannot be paraphrased as an unambiguous "possessive" using an of construction, writers tend to omit the apostrophe. One of several contingencies that complicates this rule is the issue of how "possession" is determined, as well as who/what is able to "possess"--i.e., we tend to see humans as being more able than inanimate objects to "possess" x.

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The (Un)ruly Apostrophe

Missing apostrophes, misplaced apostrophes, and unnecessary apostrophes are all common occurrences in many forms of written American English. We are accustomed to finding examples of the missing apostrophe in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, journals, casual communications, and, most notably, in student writing and do-it-yourself advertising and signs.

In particular, problems in the use of the apostrophe to mark the genitive case have a long history, as The Oxford Companion to the English Language acknowledges: "There was never a golden age in which the rules for the uses of the possessive apostrophe in English were clear-cut and known, understood, and followed by most educated people." The fact is, we simply do not possess an adequate explanation--in traditional grammar or in any other grammar--that accounts for all the functions and transformations that grammarians have crowded under the heading of the genitive case.

We can all provide examples of how the missing or misplaced possessive apostrophe--or even the absence of the morpheme s altogether--becomes a source of annoyance, confusion and/or amusement. [See page one of your handout for some examples] In the classroom, the teacher's common response is to dismiss the writer as someone who doesn't know the rules. While this assumption is often a valid one, I think that it sometimes obscures the real source of the

problem. In fact, I would argue that many writers who omit the possessive apostrophe do so quite logically, according to a set of "rules" not found in any grammar book.

In addition to documenting the how of real-world grammar, we can also attempt to uncover the why, through a process known as error analysis. Error analysis assumes that each writer has internalized rules about grammar, rules which she tends not to question, however at variance with Standard Edited Written English they may be. As Barry Kroll and John Schafer put it:

> The teacher who adopts an error-analysis perspective accepts a distinctive attitude toward error: instead of viewing errors as pathologies to be eradicated or diseases to be healed, the error-analyst views errors as necessary stages in all language-learning, as the product of intelligent cognitive strategies and therefore as potential useful indicators of what processes the student is using. (243)

Instead of relying on an ideal speaker-listener for linguistic data, the error-analyst works inductively from each sentence as it is uttered or written. Two anecdotes will illustrate. A student of mine was having trouble with the difference between their (the pronoun) and there (the place). We had spent a good deal of time on this and on other problems with the possessive apostrophe. One day, as

we sat in front of the computer, I watched Elijah write the following sentence [see #1 on page two of your handout]:

> The football players had THERE games in the main stadium.

I questioned him about it, and Elijah said that he had applied the rule correctly. The games did not belong to the football players; they didn't own them, so the proper word was <u>there</u>, he explained. OK, said I, if the football games don't belong to the players, to whom do they belong? "The coach!" he replied. Clearly, this student had thought this problem through. (I also suspect that the notion of <u>place</u> prevailed over <u>possession</u> here, because the <u>stadium</u> is so clearly a location.)

I pointed out that <u>their</u> could have other meanings besides ownership: we say "my hat" as easily as we say "my hometown" or "my school." He gave me one of those drop-dead looks I have encountered so often in thirteen years of teaching: "If only <u>I</u> were in charge of English grammar," this look said, "I would straighten all this stuff right out."

When I teach freshman writing, instead of correcting each grammatical problem, I use a checkmark system, and we sometimes spend an entire class discovering why I've left checkmarks in the margins of their papers. I ask my students to keep a "grammar log" in which they record the problem sentence under the heading of "Personal Grammar,"

and their correction under "Written Grammar." The third column is the most important, labeled "Reason for the Difference." I recently gave back papers, rife with missing apostrophes, to a writing class. One student had written [#2 on your handout]:

> It's so ironic that a TOWNS LIVELIHOOD can shorten the very PERSON'S LIFE that helped to build that town.

In the same paragraph, I found the phrase, mother's house [with apostrophe]. When I asked Stacey to tell me what governed her choices, she was quite positive: person's life and mother's house were possessives. She added, "that's what the book says." Towns livelihood was not a possessive, according to her understanding. Therefore, no apostrophe was needed.

When I went on to explain the inadequacies of the term possessive to the class, the response was a general gnashing of teeth. Why is it, my students wanted to know, they are not given the "real" grammar in elementary and high school? They begin to suspect a conspiracy.

After analyzing hundreds of examples of the missing possessive apostrophe in student essays, and after interviewing countless student writers about this particular problem, I have concluded that there is often a method to, a logic behind, these missing apostrophes. The first "rule" that I have formulated goes like this:

> When a noun phrase (that is, genitive noun--the one with the apostrophe s--plus the head noun--the word "modified," as it were--does NOT signify unambiguous, literal ownership, omit the apostrophe.

This rule should come as no surprise, given the anecdotes that I have related. Rule number two:

> When a noun phrase cannot be paraphrased by the of-construction, omit the apostrophe.

And rule number three:

> When the genitive noun in a noun phrase functions as a descriptor, or the head noun is attributive, omit the apostrophe, and, in some instances, omit the s.

Before continuing, I should note that, in some dialects like Black English, the morpheme s is not always present; however, this feature can be attributed to factors other than the ones I'm about to discuss.

First of all, I would argue that the use of inadequate terminology in grammar instruction, namely, the use of the label possessive, is a learned source of the problem. For those of us in this room, the term possessive covers a multitude of grammatical relationships; for Elijah and Stacey, and other students like them, it means just what it means--and, as Humpty Dumpty said, neither more nor less.

Granted, many writers of English have never learned grammar in any formal way. Such writers are reliant on an oral and aural culture for grammatical cues, a culture in which an unpronounced mark has no relevance. However, I must say that, in all my years spent in working with basic writers--writers considered to be in need of remediation--I have never worked with a native speaker of standard English, or of any dialect of English, who omitted the apostrophe, or even the morpheme s, in every single instance.

Many of the writers I work with have evolved rules for the possessive apostrophe that are contextually determined and meaning-based. In fact, some linguists have recently argued that the best way to account for the genitive, or possessive, is to combine phrase structure rules with an understanding of semantic context. Barbara Partee argues that the only generalization possible about the meaning of the genitive is that it always expresses one argument of a relation in which the head noun lexically determines the nature of the relation. My students wouldn't put it this way, of course, but they do seem to know this intuitively. They just don't resolve Partee's "argument" in the same way we would. I'll return to this point shortly.

Instead of attempting to describe the semantic range of this troublesome case, most traditional books on usage and grammar cover only the morphological and phonological rules characterizing the use of the apostrophe. These rules are

often too reductive to be useful; they focus on constructions such as "for goodness' sake" and "the Justice of the Supreme Court's clerk," and possessives for proper names. In fact, the lessons on--and the examples for--the genitive case that we read in twentieth-century grammar books have not changed all that much from what we find in late sixteenth-century texts. From the era of the first grammar books to the twentieth century, grammarians have recycled an incestuously redundant and internally consistent body of lore regarding the use of the apostrophe--that "crooked line," as one 18th-century grammarian put it.

The misleading term possessive case leads into my second theory regarding the widespread phenomenon of the missing apostrophe. Who or what is able to "possess"? As grammarians have insisted for the past four centuries, there ought to be a scale or hierarchy of possession, ranging from animate to inanimate, with humans ranked on top. The more one descends this scale, the more one should use the of-paraphrase instead of the apostrophe s construction. Traditional grammarians have held that phrases like the man's legs are acceptable. But the legs of the bird is generally deemed to be preferable to the bird's legs, and, as far as many grammarians are concerned, the table's legs is very bad form indeed.

However, this hierarchy is virtually ignored by most American writers today, partially because, I believe, the

of-paraphrase is simply less of an option in informal English than it used to be. Speakers and writers seem to favor genitive noun plus head noun constructions over the of-paraphrase, which they often think is just too wordy.

In earlier grammar books, the genitive was almost exclusively described in terms of periphrastic of, and the apostrophe mark itself was downplayed. A specific example: grammarians who believed that the apostrophe in the singular genitive marked an omission--the -e- of the Middle English genitive case--found themselves having to deny that there was a plural possessive form for English. To insure correct usage, then, one was forced to use the periphrastic form in plural possessives, as in the horses of the soldiers. Today, however, the phrases the soldier's horses, the women's basketball teams are perfectly acceptable.

Our school grammars, always more conservative than actual usage, continue to discuss the possessive apostrophe in terms of periphrastic of when it come to both singular and plural possessives. Writers exposed to such texts take this wisdom quite literally when attempting to solve the problem of the apostrophe. Most student writers think that the more one descends that animate/inanimate scale (from human to nonhuman) the less need there is for an apostrophe. These writers apply this logic to abstract nouns as well: words like love, as in the phrase love's arrow, simply can't "possess." My students are so hung up on the criterion of

possession that, in a kind of perverse way, they intuitively recognize some of the things that traditional grammarians have been saying all along about the inability of the inanimate to possess. However, as I said, many student writers do not consider the of-paraphrase to be a viable option for tricky phrases like the book's cover and the rainbow's end. These writers tend to apply what I earlier referred to as Rule #2: "when a noun phrase cannot be paraphrased by the of-construction, omit the apostrophe."

Rule #3--"when the genitive noun in a noun phrase functions as a descriptor, or the head noun is attributive, omit the apostrophe"--comes into play in two instances: first, when students attempt to use the of-paraphrase as a rule of thumb and realize that it is not a correct or meaningful paraphrase; and second, when students experience "interference," as it were, from noun-noun collocations and synthetic compounds, such as dog food, sports car, apple cider, and even table legs.

Let me begin with the of-paraphrase. Take a look at the phrases in #3 on your handout. How many of these phrases can be idiomatically paraphrased with of? Note that some, or perhaps all, are "predicative genitives;" that is, they can be paraphrased as sentences, as in, politicians have critics.

Now, we grammarians have the knowhow to classify these genitives as possessive, subjective, objective, descriptive,

genitive of origin, of measure, of attribute, and partitive genitive. (Is anyone here willing to take a test on these terms?) But this is highly specialized knowledge that has not made its way into the average grammar text. And I should know--I have over fifty such handbooks on my shelves, and I have examined most of them on this particular matter. Our students have only the inadequate notion of possession to help them when they try to determine whether to apostrophe or not to apostrophe.

The point is that the surface structure of a genitive phrase stands in relation to semantic content in the same way the proverbial tip stands in relation to the iceberg. [Look over #4 on your handout for some non-student examples, and see #6, the policy of the U. S. Board of Geographical Names. Whether one agrees with this policy or not--and Board Director Roger Payne tells me that he is constantly beseiged by those who are incensed by it--I do think the Board has captured something about the attributive aspect of some genitives, no matter what their historical origins may be.] To return to #4: how many of these examples have a possessive sense? Visitors [no apostrophe] Parking means parking for visitors, not parking of visitors. A Farmers [no apostrophe] Market is not a market of farmers who are themselves for sale, or even a market for farmers--a Farmers Market is a market to which city folk come to in order to buy goods from farmers.

Not only are we losing the of-paraphrase, we are also making huge dents in one of the more venerable rules derived from Latin grammar; that is, that one cannot use a noun to modify another noun. When some writers try to contend with compounds and common collocations, including hyphenated noun-noun constructions, they see little or no difference in meaning between these and the genitive noun plus head noun construction. Look at [#5 on your handout] for examples of noun-noun constructions, constructions that are certainly on the increase in modern English for a variety of reasons that have little to do with grammar. I am beginning to suspect that these constructions exert a peculiar pressure on writers to omit the possessive apostrophe.

If I am correct, how can we account for the fact that writers who omit the apostrophe keep the morpheme s?

The apostrophe is, of course, a feature of written English only, and this fact is an irrefutable reason for the decline in its use. Writers are much more apt to retain the s in the genitive because, I think, they are used to adding or subtracting this morpheme--not always correctly, to be sure--in other contexts, such as in third person singular and in the plural.

Once again, these writers are using the criterion of meaning to govern their decision. The morpheme s simply has more semantic content than the apostrophe mark. Writers may

not be able to say what. the s means, but they do know that it means.

These rules that I have postulated for what we might call the apostrophe-less genitive stir up an old controversy over the existence of case in modern English. Most grammarians agree, with some qualifications, that two cases exist in modern English--the common case and the genitive case. However, some grammarians ask how the apostrophe plus s morpheme can be a noun inflection if it can be attached to words from other classes, such as in the woman over there's [apostrophe] car.

What would happen if we began to treat the genitive not as a case, but as a marked functional shift--if I can coin such an oxymoron--as a shift from noun to adjective? After all, most genitives share with most adjectives the same syntactic position. Imagine eliminating the possessive apostrophe altogether, as various kinds of genitives are shooed into the adjectival paradigm. Of course, the next step would be to drop the morpheme s, which is probably too extreme for the majority of the users of English.

To treat what we traditionally label genitive case as an adjective is not so new or radical an idea, but it has been a historically unpopular one. John Wallis, in his 1653 text, Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae, was most likely the first grammarian to argue that any English noun with a

genitive morpheme is, in fact, an adjectivum possessivum. But Wallis' idea never really caught on, obviously.

In the end, what is inarguable is that the phenomenon of the missing apostrophe in contemporary written English gives us a unique opportunity to record and describe the kind of pervasive morphemic, grammatical, and syntactical change that, up for the most part, we've only been able to observe in a post facto, static way.

And perhaps in the future, in some grammatical utopia, our frustration over the possessive apostrophe will be nothing more that a source of amusement to those who speak EMME--Even More Modern English. Thank you.

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"The (Un)ruly Apostrophe"

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Seniors Party at Alvin's house
(a sign in an Alvin and the Chipmunks cartoon)

Big **Girls** Toys
(ad for a jeweler's in Vogue)

Mothers Day and **Veterans** Day and **Columbus** Day
BUT St. Patrick's Day

Your sect by **it's** suffering has furnished a remarkable proof of the universal spirit of religious intolerance, inherent in every sect, disclaimed by all while feeble, and practised by all when in powere.
(Thomas Jefferson, letter to Mordecai Noah 1818)

Concerned with **todays'** illness and **tomorrow's** health
(stamp on Beth Israel Hospital envelope)

Louise,s Taxi
(sign in Watertown, MA)

Bible **Truth's**
(Evangelical Tract Distributors)

Charles **Dicken's** "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby"
(PBS caption)

St Mark Church
(sign in Buffalo, NY)

Common instances of missing apostrophes in student papers:

1. In **todays** society there are many advantages to being cremated.
2. When she discussed Black English she talked about both **sides** negative and positive aspects.
3. I believe he is trying to destroy the **Beatles** credibility.